

Report on Our Future

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This report was first written immediately following my sabbatical, June, 2017. It was presented as a series of notes both orally and in written form to any interested congregant. It has been tightened into a more manageable size and written to ignite conversations about the future of the First Unitarian Society in light of the state of religious institutions in our nation. I have omitted at least one major section in the original presentation, that of multi-cultural growth.

Guiding Research Question During Sabbatical: *How do we create a sustainable congregational model at the First Unitarian Society in Hastings? What do we need to know about congregational size, multicultural growth and financing congregations in the new millennium?*

Research Methodology: *Congregational Experts. (Reports, Alban Institute, Blogs, Seminarian Research, UUA staff)
Popular Media (Pew, Wall Street Journal, Forbes, Washington Post, NY Times)
Conversations with Ministers (anecdotal reporting)*

SUMMARY OF THE SITUATION

15% of all Americans claimed no religious affiliation in 2008. In 2016, that number more than doubled to 31%. (Buddhism is the fastest growing religion in America.)

The numbers of people who call themselves “spiritual but not religious” is also growing. These are not atheists. They seek spiritual practice and spiritual community. This group is often considered the fertile ground for UUs to grow. While we are clearly a religion and fall into the precise patterns these folks say don’t interest them, we have the capacity to meet their stated needs, if we want to.

POPULATION TRENDS

Baby Boomers (born 1945-1963):	76 million
Gen X: (1964-1979)	40 million
Millennials (1980-2000):	78 million

Since 2000, fertility rates have been in sharp decline. Much like the Gen Xers, the next generation will be about half the one before it. This means we should expect about half the number of new families coming in our doors unless we do things differently, attracting new groups of people.

SIZE INFORMATION

Sociologists tell us that groups under 150 members function as a single organism. Over 150, the group breaks into multiple pieces. Each piece will have a center and each person will know about 80 people. This means that when an organization shifts over 150, people start to feel like a stranger in what used to be a very familiar place. (This happened to us when I arrived and we grew to 170.) It is natural for groups that hadn’t prepared for this change to shift back to 150 or below. In larger groups, people have to shift their sense of themselves as being in the middle/having power to being in one of several groups, each of which has a center. Over 150, what one group wants will no longer dictate what happens in the congregation. Making this shift sustainable requires trust in leadership and an acceptance of the new size dynamics.

We can see this happen in congregations around the country. We hover between 130+170. But now, because of

changes in our national culture, religious institutions have to work harder to maintain our usual numbers. It used to be that we could do fairly little to bring in about as many as we lost each year, keeping numbers stable. In our new reality, we have to be more diligent just to prevent steep declines.

FIVE TYPES OF GROWTH

Growth in numbers won't happen if we don't grow in the other areas necessary for congregational sustainability and without growth in numbers, our congregation will disappear within a generation.

Maturation Growth: How Do Members Grow In Faith?

- Do we understand Unitarian Universalism?
- Do we teach the faith?
- Do we offer this teaching at different levels?
- Are we going deeply enough, especially in worship?

**Be careful not to see yourselves as a business. Consumer churches where it's all about what you offer aren't sustainable. Most of what you offer has to be spiritual and missional.*

Organizational Growth: How Do We Keep The Body of The Church Stable?

- The Building: Congregations need the right space and it has to be clean, useful, and clearly theirs.
- Ministry: Longer term ministries will grow congregations. Clergy or staff turnover is destabilizing.
- Lay Leadership: Important to have a process for maintaining institutional memory.

Incarnational (Outreach): How is Our Faith Embodied in the World?

- How do others see your members live their faith?
- Is service or justice work for everyone or do only a few participate?
- Are there local or even national issues your church owns?
- How do you serve the community?

Associational Growth: How Are We Connected to the Faith Community?

- Growing churches aren't isolated from other churches.
- Growing churches are in relationship with people of many faiths.
- Growing churches are connected with their denomination.

Numerical: if you pay attention to these forms of growth, the numbers grow too. If you don't, even when people walk in the doors, they won't stay. If a church isn't strong in the other 4 areas, the numbers will reflect that. There is no there there.

A COMPILATION OF THINGS THAT KEEPS SMALL CHURCHES SMALL

The things that hold us back aren't unique to us. These are found in many small congregations. There are cultural issues in small congregations that prevent the types of growth needed. These are the things that keep us small.

- Low expectations of membership
- Exclusive/cliquest culture
- Inwardly focused rather than mission/outwardly focused
- Lack of clear theology- small congregations want room for everyone, watering down the message
- Minister is responsible for all pastoral care
- Lack of (or dwindling) institutional support for Religious Education
- Distrust of authority/leadership
- Unclear power structure- not reflective of formal organizational structureⁱ
- Very little accountability when congregants behave poorlyⁱⁱ

Above all else, the one thing I heard was that small congregations stay small because they don't want to change. If a congregation has grown and maintained growth, it's because the congregation was committed to it.

How do you know if you're unwilling to change? Here are some examples from other congregations:

- The congregation has talked about growth for years without any actionable consequences or change.
- Each time someone suggests something new, three negatives/reasons it won't work, follow.
- A fondness for the past exceeds passion for the future. ("That's not how we do it.")
- Small changes or even proposed changes spark very large (negative) responses.

Congregations have been able to rest on their laurels for centuries, hovering around 150 by not doing much of anything. In today's context and reality, those congregations will be gone in a generation.

DREAMING THE FUTURE

If we were to move forward, seeking to reimagine ourselves for the 21st century, I'd hope we'd begin with a congregational meeting during which information as seen in this report is offered as a baseline. It is unrealistic to think that congregants who have always known one model of church might be able to think outside the box.

In order for this to happen, we need leaders trained in adaptive leadership, a significant portion of the congregation open to real change and a willingness to hold people accountable for obstructionism. If we have those things, there is no reason to think we can't meet our goals.

IDEAS FOR MOVING FORWARD

Here are some things I'd like us to consider if we're serious about finding sustainable models for our future.

1. The first thing that would need to happen is to have a small group of leaders agree to moving a vision forward. That group would need to be trained in Adaptive Leadership and would commit their time over the next 2-3 years to moving the congregation forward. *(There is currently a group taking an online course in Adaptive Leadership and that group can be extended at any time.)*
2. Being sure not to engage too much in internal work, we talk with each other about maturational, organizational, associational and incarnational growth. Part of this conversation is about committing to a new vision for our future. This should be done with a trained facilitator who understands each area. Unfortunately, I think this opportunity was lost when we created the Listening Conversations around a consumer based model, so instead of having the whole congregation participate, I suggest we engage a smaller group of leaders. A critical part of this conversation would be to commit to wanting to growⁱⁱⁱ and change.
3. Commit to local or national issues, making us visible and relevant.
4. Get rid of the pledge drive and shift to a full-year model of assumed financial commitment.
5. Consider a serious rethinking of the way we partner with other UU congregations. I have started conversations about merging or other radical partnership models, giving us an economy of scale that might give us all the boost we need.
6. Create new revenue streams. Sustainable congregations get two thirds of their operating budget from outside membership. Schools, art centers, merchandise sales and rentals are reliable sources of income. Once the congregation was committed to new models, a small group of creative thinkers can investigate our many options.

7. Reimagine worship. Our current 19th century Protestant liturgy isn't a draw and doesn't really reflect our common spiritual practice. Continue Sunday morning with the acceptance that it will be smaller and may not attract new families and consider new ways of deepening our faith lives outside of Sundays. Some examples include: Quiet Tuesdays, Bible Study, The Artist's Way Group (for a fee to non-members), Drumming Circle, Online (see below)
8. I have additional ideas about what the future of First Unitarian might be, if we engage the difficult work of embracing the possibility of a future that looks different from our past.
 - a. Religious Education
 - i. Weekly after-school classes like OWL for a fee to non-members (\$500 October – May)
 - ii. Weekend family courses like Neighboring Faiths for a fee (\$250 for 10 sessions)
 - iii. Community Youth Group (with significant service opportunities)
 - iv. Family Worship Sunday mornings
 - b. Being online is the wave of the future. Podcasting sermons, live streaming services and creating online spiritual community is the growing edge.
 - i. 3 minute online retreats
 - ii. Post sermon conversations live
 - c. Get serious about social media. We can become a voice for Unitarian Universalism if we utilize the platforms available to us.

CONCLUSION

The world is changing and traditional religious institutions aren't keeping up. Mainline religion is in a free-fall and without a reimagining of ourselves, there is no reason to think we'll be a going concern in 50 years. Nonetheless, there is reason to hope. While we have fallen into a very traditional church model, Unitarian Universalism has an elasticity at our core. Unlike some of our counterparts, we have demonstrated great flexibility in our modernization of theological concepts and our democratization of church polity. It is my firm belief that if we want to change, what's next for us can be very exciting. Sadly, our congregation, not unlike many others, is resistant to change. We often greet it with anxiety masked with good intentions. So, this is our chance. We will either grab onto our potential future enthusiastically, or we will disintegrate very slowly until none of us are here any more to care. I don't want to sound bleak. I'm simply telling you what's happening in the country and I'm telling you it's not inevitable. If we are willing, the flame of First Unitarian can burn brightly for a long time. I'm hoping this report serves as our ignition.

In Peace and Love,

Rev. Peggy Clarke

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ⁱ Unclear power structures empower people based on longevity in the congregation rather than democratic process. We see this in Board meetings when the elected officers will defer decision making to discuss their ideas with matriarchs or patriarchs of a congregation. While this is a good way to function as a small church, it doesn't create an empowered congregation and doesn't lead to growth.

ⁱⁱ This is generally demonstrated in a lack of a Disruptive Behavior Policy or an unwillingness to use it.

ⁱⁱⁱ Growth in this context is not limited to numbers but includes all the other ways and forms of growing.